

## The Vanishing Farmland Crisis: Critical Views of the Movement to Preserve Agricultural Land

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relief supplied to suffering farmers. "The response," Atkins suggests, "serves as a barometer of the declining value of farmers in American society and the increasing value of money. Success would come to be measured more by wealth than by nobility of occupation" (126).

The words are poignant now, in a period that future historians may label the final crisis of the family farm. They indicate that Atkin's work has even larger meaning than suggested thus far. She has taken on one of the truly big tasks of American historians: to explain why farm people have become such a small part of the total American population. The task is important because American agrarians from Thomas Jefferson to Henry A. Wallace and beyond have insisted that the nation must have a large farm population, for social and political reasons even more than for economic ones. "How," Atkins asks at the outset of her book, "can farm people stay on the land and face those threats year after year?" (1) As the question implies, the pressures working against the agrarian vision of what America should be have been great. During the past half century, most American farm people surrendered to them, and now the small number that remains on the land faces overwhelming new threats to its existence as farmers. Yet in the late nineteenth century and on into the first decade and a half of the twentieth, the farm population grew rapidly in spite of grasshoppers, high railroad rates, and low commodity prices. The pests slowed the growth of some Minnesota counties and pushed others into decline, but the desire to farm and the determination to hold people on the land still had strength, and the population declines were only temporary in the 1870s. The grasshopper plagues ended as quickly and mysteriously as they had come, and now our modernized agricultural system deals effectively with insects. Even a century ago, grasshoppers did not affect the farm population nearly as much as technological revolution, cost-price squeezes, and urban opportunities have in our day.

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

RICHARD S. KIRKENDALL

*The Vanishing Farmland Crisis: Critical Views of the Movement to Preserve Agricultural Land*, edited by John Baden. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1984. ix, 169 pp. Notes, index. \$19.95 cloth.

During recent years a good deal of discussion has centered on the rapid loss of farmland in the United States. These losses, so the reports go, have resulted from paving over millions of acres and from destructive erosion. The losses have been both quantitative and qualitative. Some of the publicity has been rather frightening. If certain writers are accu-

rate, the United States is facing a farmland crisis and future generations of Americans will confront a food-and-fiber shortage.

Nine economists joined forces in the series of essays that make up *The Vanishing Farmland Crisis* to argue that there is no farmland crisis. It is not possible to describe the views of every author in a brief review, but the overarching theme of the book is a denial of the existence of serious cropland problems in the United States. For example, to discount the crisis theory, Clifton B. Luttrell, a retired specialist in agricultural economics with the Federal Reserve Bank in St. Louis, says that every indication leads him to believe that there is an abundance of good farmland. The scarcity stories, he claims, are based on emotion rather than hard statistical evidence. Luttrell argues that, if there were a cropland shortage, food and fiber would be scarce and prices would rise dramatically. Actually the opposite is true; there have been constant farm surpluses and generally depressed prices. Moreover, food prices have risen at a slower rate than has disposable income.

Each of the nine authors is critical of some of the studies that have presented a bleak outlook for the nation's farmland. They are especially critical of the National Agricultural Lands Study published in 1981. Julian L. Simon, professor economics at the University of Illinois, charges in his chapter, "Some False Notions About Farmland Preservation," that the NALS study and others are filled with errors and conflicting evidence. Theodore W. Schultz, perhaps the dean of agricultural economists in the United States, contributed a chapter on soil conservation. He argues that those charging that modern agriculture is dangerous to the environment are talking nonsense. Schultz shows how production has increased on less acreage, which he believes demonstrates the continues productiveness of American farmland. He also claims that farmers know the value of their soil and are the best guardians of it.

Thus, contrary to much propaganda, there is no farmland or cropland crisis, according to this book. Soil loss from erosion is also much less of a problem than many believe. These essayists generally oppose public planning for farmland use and hold that the free market is the best allocator of land use. They oppose political establishment of rules and regulations for the utilization of cropland because they believe that special interest groups would have too much power in this process and that centralized government authority would be much less efficient in allocating farmland resources than is the market.

While this small book will receive sharp criticism from those who want more public control over farmland, it provides a good anecdote to some of the studies that exaggerate predictions of danger and doom. Readers may or may not agree with the conclusions, but they will find

the presentations challenging and informative. Certainly it will be difficult for anyone interested in the subject of farmland to ignore this book.

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

GILBERT C. FITE

*New Roots for Agriculture*, by Wes Jackson. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985. xv, 150 pp. \$6.95 paper.

*New Roots for Agriculture* is a new edition of Wes Jackson's 1980 volume on the ecological shortcomings of American agriculture. Jackson believes that our heavily-mechanized, chemically-oriented agriculture is indictable on many grounds, but especially for its destructiveness of soil resources. He suggests a shift away from the cultivation of annual grains and toward "perennial polyculture"—the growth of self-perpetuating grains in an uncultivated prairie setting. Not only does Jackson believe that this would save, and perhaps even restore, the soil but he also sees it as an integral part of a new and more fulfilling rural life. In a new afterword, Jackson discusses his recent experiments with perennial grains at his land institute near Salina, Kansas.

It is appropriate that a new edition of Jackson's book should come out in the mid-eighties, when agriculture faces an immediate economic crisis and perhaps a long-term environmental one. One of the thoughtful spokespeople for alternative agriculture, Jackson deserves the attention of people concerned about the future of our food and farming system.

NORTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

DAVID DANBOM

*Cotton Crisis*, by Robert E. Snyder. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984. xvii, 174 pp. Notes, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$19.95 cloth.

Throughout most of its history the economy of the Deep South was in thrall to a single crop: cotton. An inedible commodity produced largely for sale on a far-flung market, the fleecy staple rewarded its servants handsomely in antebellum times but its sway became increasingly burdensome in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Inhibited from developing a diversified agricultural base by numerous structural and technological impediments, southern farmers not only suffered from chronic poverty, but were subject to the constant risk that the intricate web of market relations which attached them to Boston and Liverpool might be disrupted, plunging an already precarious

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